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August 11, 2013: Reza Aslan Speaks to the Commonwealth Club

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Title: Reza Aslan Speaks to the Commonwealth Club

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8/11/2013—I was listening to Reza Aslan, the author of *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, the one who was famously interviewed on Fox leading to the bestseller status of his book. He was fascinating. Aslan was speaking to the Commonwealth Club on a regular series on National Public Radio, broadcast in Pittsburgh on Sunday mornings. Aslan made two points in the time I heard him. First, the nature of Jesus and his message and second, the history of Christianity. In terms of Jesus, Aslan called Jesus his “hero.” Jesus, Aslan said, was concerned only for the poor and the marginalized. That was all he cared about. Aslan was taught about Jesus by the Jesuits (I don’t know where) and Jesus’s “preferential option for the poor.” This was his message, his life and his death. Aslan’s closed with this: anyone who uses Jesus to advance a political position or enrich himself betrays the legacy of Jesus. Aslan is so obviously a believer in Jesus, although not a Christian but a Muslim, that his words moved the highly secular audience to applause. Hearing Aslan’s personal commitment to Jesus was inspiring. But probably more significant is his view of early Christianity. Aslan describes the Church after the death of Jesus but before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. as choosing between the vision of James and the vision of Paul that the future of Christianity. For James, the brother of Jesus, the Christian movement remained within Judaism. The message could and should go out to non-Jews, and eventually it was agreed that they need not be circumcised, but they would have to live in accordance with the law Moses as, essentially, Jews. Paul’s vision was quite different. He understood Judaism as having come to an end with the death and resurrection of Christ. And the Christ figure he describes is not the Messiah of the Old Testament but an eternal being, in some sense a part of God. This is something wholly new and outside Judaism as such. It is at the very least a total re-interpretation of Judaism and, it would be fair to add, Judaism’s fulfillment, in Paul’s view. Eventually, the death of James and 62 A.D. and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. decided the matter in favor of Paul. But it had been a near thing. While James was alive, his vision was dominant and the Church in Jerusalem was also dominant. That Church and that movement was essentially destroyed along with much else when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Aslan is quite a figure. It is to be hoped that this is the Islam with which Americans now become more familiar.